



# P.L.A.Y.

PERFORMING FOR LOS ANGELES YOUTH



"Boot of Adversity" by Jeremy Ruthberg

## ***No Child...***

by Nilaja Sun  
Directed by Hal Brooks  
Kirk Douglas Theatre  
March 6–April 13, 2008

DISCOVERY GUIDE

# HOW TO USE THIS DISCOVERY GUIDE

**NO CHILD...**, written and performed by Nilaja Sun, is a fascinating journey into the challenged and charged environment of a New York City high school classroom. In the play, a visiting teaching artist named Nilaja Sun attempts to energize students by staging *Our Country's Good*, a play by Timberlake Wertenbaker. The play itself and the experience of staging the play have a profound impact on sixteen different characters at the school, each one portrayed by Sun. *No Child...* takes a hard look at the challenges faced by students and teachers alike in the contemporary educational system in America. This Discovery Guide will offer some social context for the circumstances and perspectives voiced in the play, as well as examine the use of theatre arts as a medium for persuasive argument.

## VOCAB

Vocabulary words are in **bold type**. Definitions are within each section.

HMMM...

### OBJECTIVES OF THIS DISCOVERY GUIDE

Provide a context for the story and ideas in *No Child...* as they relate to the public education system in contemporary America

Familiarize students with the means to construct effective arguments

Create dialogue to express a point a view and convey character



"YOU GO GIRL!!!"

Mrs. Kennedy, it seems to me that this whole school system, not just here but the whole system is falling apart under us and there are these accountability laws that have nothing to do with solutions and if we expect to stay some sort of grand nation for the next 50 years well we got another thing coming. We're not teaching these kids how to be leaders. We're just getting them ready for jail.

—Ms. Sun in *No Child...*



NO KIDDING

Explore the use of theatre arts for purposes of persuasion

Consider the skills required when an actor portrays multiple characters



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DISCOVERY GUIDE CREDITS

**Doug Cooney**, Discovery Guide writer, is a playwright and novelist for young people. His youth musical *Nobody's Perfect*, adapted from his novel co-written with actress Marlee Matlin, premiered at the Kennedy Center in October 2007 and will embark on a national tour in 2009-10. *Imagine*, a new youth musical, premieres at South Coast Rep in Costa Mesa, CA, in June 2008.

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# VOCAB

**Con:** A reason or argument against something

**Juvenile delinquent:** A young person who does not obey authority and commits criminal acts, like vandalism or violence

**Pro:** A reason or argument for something

**Standardized:** Created to be the same wherever you go; made uniform

**Teaching artist:** A guest teacher who is also a professional actor, writer, dancer, musician or visual artist

# ONE WOMAN SHOW

**IN HER SOLO PERFORMANCE, NO CHILD...**, Nilaja Sun portrays a **teaching artist** named, as it happens, “Nilaja Sun,” who arrives at Malcolm X High School in the Bronx, N.Y., for a six-week residency in a classroom known as “the worst class in school.” The school janitor describes the students as **juvenile delinquents**; the school principal describes them as “challenging” – but adds, “I believe in them.” The students describe themselves as convicts, marched past metal detectors, with little control over their lives. As a classroom teaching artist, Ms. Sun’s goal is to have the students read and perform a play by Timberlake Wertenbaker called *Our Country’s Good*. This play-within-the-play concerns British convicts in 1787 who are imprisoned in a harsh and brutal penal colony in Australia. In the play, the prisoners organize themselves to perform a play and the experience boosts the spirits of jailers and convicts alike. In *No Child...*, Ms. Sun hopes *Our Country’s Good* will have the same impact on her students.

As a solo performance artist, Nilaja Sun often recreates personal experiences from her own life by portraying herself interacting with other invented characters. “I call myself the ‘I-character,’” Sun explains, “and the performances are about this ‘Nilaja Sun person’ and her journey through some major event – like my experience of 9-11, for example, or my experience when a friend was killed in an accident.”

In *No Child...*, Sun brings this highly personal approach to her story of a teaching artist doing theatre workshops in challenged inner-city classrooms. Sun believes that her performance style – one actor portraying multiple roles – works particularly well for this topic. “Solo performance – that’s something that teachers do everyday,” Sun says. “That is one of the reasons why I decided to perform *No Child...* myself rather than share the stage with other actors. ... in the classrooms, it’s one teacher/one person doing it all and doing it alone.”

## CAST OF CHARACTERS:

In her one-woman performance, Nilaja Sun portrays sixteen different characters.



**Jackson Baron Copeford III:** Janitor and narrator

**Nilaja Sun:** teaching artist

**Mrs. Kennedy:** School principal

**Ms. Tam, Ms. Projenski and Mr. Johnson:** Classroom teachers

**Shondrika, Jerome, Coca, Brian, Jose, Chris, Philip and Xiomara:** Students

**Security Guard Doña Guzman:** Jose’s grandmother



## EXERCISE: WHO CARES?

**NILAJA SUN CLEARLY CARES A LOT ABOUT ARTS EDUCATION.** She has worked in the field as a teaching artist. She has strong opinions about the quality of education in America. She created *No Child...*, a play about the impact of arts education in inner-city schools that is touring the nation.

**What is an issue that you care about?** It could be something personal, like “I should be allowed to stay up as late as I want” or “I deserve a bigger allowance.” The issue could be local: “There should be more skate parks in my town.” It could relate to your school, or maybe it is a larger concern like animal rights or the environment or the use of steroids in professional sports.

Pick an issue you feel strongly about. Be specific. Not just “such-and-such is good (or bad),” but “such-and-such should be more like this.”

Draw a picture of the issue. Draw the setting in which the issue occurs. Draw the people, animals or things affected by the issue. Draw the **pros** and **cons** of the issue. Draw whatever you want. Just draw it.

### NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND

When was the last time you took a **standardized** test in school? Did your teacher explain what it had to do with your education? When was the last time you had an art class? Or music? Theatre? Dance?

The title *No Child...* refers to the 2002 No Child Left Behind Act, a federal law that requires students to take standardized exams on a regular basis to track student – and teacher – performance. In order to improve student scores, many schools have extended lessons in the test subject areas: language arts, reading, math and, starting in 2007-2008, science. To make time for these longer classes, “less important” subjects are often dropped from the schedule. As a result, many students – perhaps even you – are not offered art, drama, dance, music or physical education classes.



Teaching artist B.J. Dodge working with Annenberg Middle School Program students at Foshay Learning Center. Photo by Steve Cohn



# ART AS PERSUASION

**NOBODY LIKES TO BE LECTURED**, which might explain why the arts are a popular tool of persuasion, educating and encouraging audiences to change political views, tastes, philosophies or personal convictions. People watching a political debate usually have a strong opinion and are difficult to influence. An audience at the theatre, on the other hand, expects to be entertained. While they laugh at the comedy or get caught up in the drama, the audience becomes more open to suggestion, and the **playwright's** message is more likely to take hold.

Some art is only intended to entertain, of course – and that's okay. Other times, artists insert direct or indirect messages in the content of their work, hoping to assert their opinion on a particular issue. For example, movies like *The Simpsons* and *Happy Feet* raise the issue of environmental awareness, but the message is buried in the jokes and storyline. On the other hand, Pink's song "Dear Mr. President" and the Dixie Chicks' "Not Ready To Make Nice" offer direct and deliberate political statements. Similarly, stand-up comics like Dave Chappelle, Chris Rock and Carlos Mencia are known for inserting passionate personal opinions in their work.

Theatre artists can be equally direct. Playwright Bertolt Brecht made bold political declarations in his work so that you knew exactly what he believed. Playwright George Bernard Shaw preferred to have his characters argue both sides of the coin – so that the audience would continue the discussion, trying to decide which side was right, long after the performance.

**VOCAB**

**Counter:** To oppose or defend against

**Irrelevant:** Not related to the subject being discussed

**Playwright:** A person who writes plays

**Rebut:** To defend with evidence or proof

We gonna travel, explore, see somethin' different for a change. I love the Bronx but there's more to life right? You taught me that. 'Man is born free' right...  
– Coca in *No Child...*



## EXERCISE: "DID NOT." "DID SO!"

**PLAYGROUND ARGUMENTS** often dissolve into a shouting match between two kids, yelling "did not!" and "did so!" back and forth. Neither side wins, nothing gets proved and somebody ends up in tears. A successful persuasive argument takes a lot more planning.

In order to make a strong, well-crafted, persuasive argument, you should state your position, supported with strong, justified reasons – and then anticipate and **counter** any arguments that oppose your position. Playwrights who want to include a persuasive argument in their work will often investigate every aspect of their issue so that characters can convincingly argue both the pros and the cons.

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Return to the issue you identified in your drawing on page 5 and write one sentence that clearly presents your point of view on the subject.

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**SUPPORT YOUR POSITION:** At the library or on the Internet, find two facts and a statement from an expert on your issue. Add a personal story with an emotional impact.

Fact one:

Fact two:

Expert statement:

Story:

**ANTICIPATE COUNTER-ARGUMENTS:** How are your opponents going to argue against your position. List three.

Argument one:

Argument two:

Argument three:

**DEFEND YOUR POSITION:** **Rebut** the three arguments listed above. Why are they wrong, **irrelevant** or just less right than you?

Rebuttal one:

Rebuttal two:

Rebuttal three:



Lynwood High School students with teaching artist Obi Ndefo. Photo by Steve Cohn

[BEFORE THE PLAY]

Use the argument you have mapped out to write a persuasive essay. Read your essay aloud to a few people who might disagree with you – parents, siblings, friends – and ask if they are swayed by your argument. Does your persuasive essay work?



Birmingham High School students performing in P.L.A.Y.'s Speak To Me program. Photos by Steve Cohn

Speak To Me students from Lynwood High School.

# CREATING CHARACTER

**SUN PORTRAYS A TOTAL OF SIXTEEN CHARACTERS** over the course of *No Child...*, often arguing with each other. The character who wins the argument is the more persuasive one – and if the playwright is convincing enough, the audience may be persuaded too.

The more a writer knows about a character, the more real that character's words and actions seem. She may not tell the reader or audience everything about the character, but her understanding of how he thinks shows through in what she has written for him to do and say. It is common for writers to use people they know when inventing characters. Some writers claim that every character they create is somehow a part of themselves. All the characters in *No Child...* are based on real people whom Sun has met or seen. It is extremely ambitious to make up every like and dislike, every fear and goal, every habit and expression of a character. Basing a character on one or more people you know – or know something about – gives you a springboard.



## EXERCISE: SAYS WHO?

**LOOK BACK AT THE PERSONAL STORY** you included in your persuasive argument. Consider the people involved in that personal story. They could be people you know well or people you hardly know at all. You might even want to exaggerate your story and add a character that comes entirely out of your imagination.

List the people in your personal story below.

1. Start with “yourself,” like Nilaja Sun does in *No Child...*

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2. Identify someone in your story that you know well.

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3. Identify someone in your story that you don't know well, or at all.

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4. If you want, make up an imaginary character that fits into your story. Decide whether it is a boy, girl, man or woman, give your character an age, and a name.

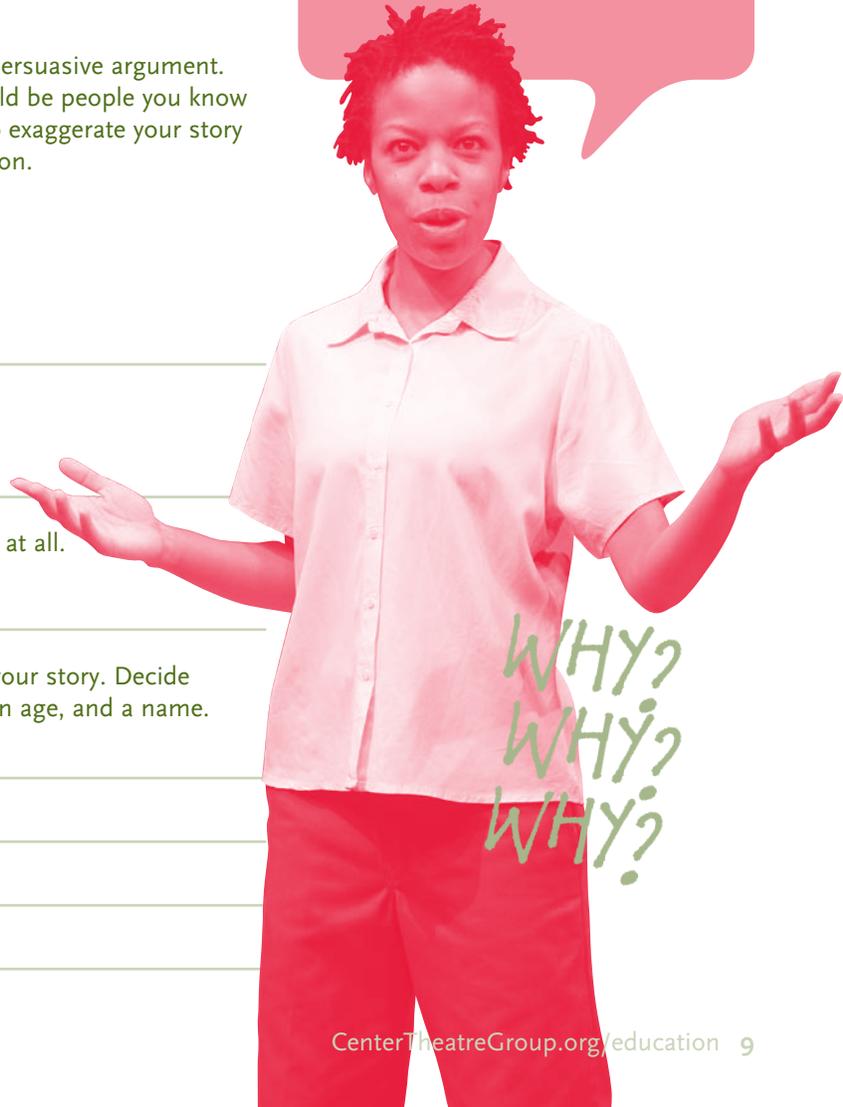
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Why did I choose a play about convicts? These kids aren't convicts. The kids in Rikers are convicts. These kids are just in tenth grade. They've got the world telling them they are going to end up in jail. Why would I choose a play about Convicts? What was I thinking? Why couldn't I choose a play about kings and queens in Africa or the triumphs of the Taino Indian? This totally wouldn't jive if I were White and trying to do this play with them. How dare I! Why would I choose to do a play about convicts?  
—Ms. Sun in *No Child...*



**CONSIDER THESE CHARACTERS.** Choose two who together could tell all or part of your story. Write those two names at the top of the two columns below. Fill in the blanks to create each character.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

What I look like:

Where I'm from:

My biggest dream is to:

I plan to make my dream come true by:

I am really good at:

My biggest weakness is:

My greatest fear is:

You can always depend on me to:

What people notice about me is:

I don't want anyone to know that I:

What I think about the *issue*:

RIGHT!



# POINT OF VIEW

**IN NO CHILD...**, Nilaja Sun shares her perspective on arts education. As audience members, we have our own point of view on her performance. How were you affected by the play?

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## EXERCISE:

What is Nilaja Sun's point of view on arts education?

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Is *No Child...* persuasive? What aspects of a well-crafted, persuasive argument are present in *No Child...*? What aspects are missing?

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Was the school portrayed in *No Child...* anything like your school? Were the students or teachers like people you know? Were the issues they faced familiar? Describe three things you saw onstage that struck you as "true" or "real."

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2. \_\_\_\_\_

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3. \_\_\_\_\_

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By us doing the show, see what I'm saying, we could prove something to the whole school and ours moms and her dad, see what I'm saying, and Mrs. Kennedy and Ms. Tam that we is the shi...shining stars of the school, see what I'm saying? —Brian in *No Child...*

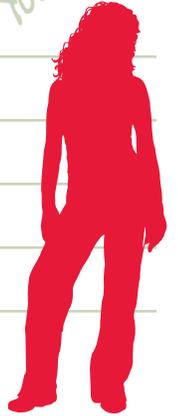
GOOD?  
BAD?



Did *No Child...* change your mind or teach you anything new? Describe something you now see differently or better understand as a result of the play.

Five horizontal lines for writing a response to the prompt.

CHANGE YOUR MIND?



Let me tell ya, I don't know nothing about no No Child, Yes Child, Who Child, What Child. I do know there's a hole in the fourth floor ceiling ain't been fixed since '87, all the bathrooms on the third floor, they broke. Now, who's accountable for dat?  
— Jackson Baron Cofford III in *No Child...*

## WHO ARE YOU TALKING TO?

**DIALOGUE IS A CONVERSATION** between two or more characters in a play. The way a character speaks reflects that person's age, education, interests and background. Accents, dialects, vocabulary, slang or particular expressions inform an audience who a character is and where he or she comes from. In addition, the way a character uses language tells a lot about that character's behavior. A character that interrupts a lot, for example, might be upset, over-enthusiastic or inconsiderate. A character that talks too much could be bossy, nervous, stubborn or indecisive. A character that doesn't talk much at all could be shy, secretive, reluctant to speak – or so powerful that words are not necessary.

Ideally, **dialogue** should sound like real people talking. Some writers **eavesdrop** on public conversations so they can acquire an "ear" for good dialogue. At the same time, situations in plays are "larger-than-life" and should not necessarily sound like ordinary day-to-day events. For example, the characters in *No Child...* don't waste much time on general introductions like "hello, how are you?" as it might happen in real life. Instead, they dive right into the action, making their claims and openly speaking their minds (which may or may not happen in real life).

### EXERCISE: ARE YOU TALKING TO ME?

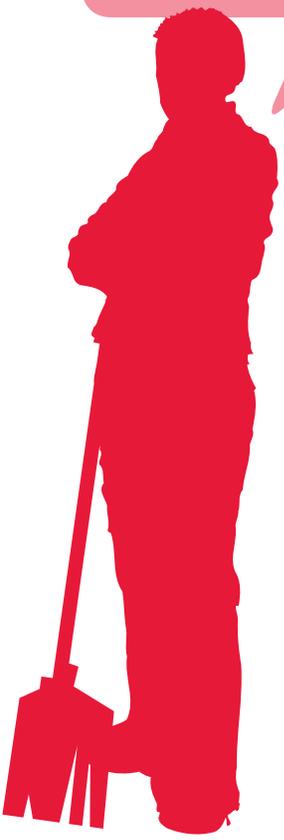
**LOOK BACK AT THE PERSONAL STORY** that supports your position on page 7 and the way you wove that story into your persuasive essay on page 8. Consider the two characters you created on page 10. Write a dialogue between those two characters that recreates all or part of the personal story. Try to include the arguments you raised in your persuasive essay in creative ways.

**Your script should look something like this excerpt from *No Child...*, only longer:**

Jerome: Mom came home early. Told me to run over here fast as I could.  
I missed it. I missed it all. And I worked hard to learn my lines.  
Sun: Yes, you did Jerome. You worked very hard.  
Jerome: So, you gonna be teaching here again next year?  
Sun: That's the plan. But, only 10th graders again. Sorry.  
Jerome: Oh no worries. I'm definitely gonna get left back for you. Psych...  
Lemme go shout out to all them thespians. You gonna be around.  
Sun: No, actually I have a commercial shoot early tomorrow morning.

## VOCAB

**Dialogue:** The conversation written between two or more characters in literature or plays  
**Eavesdrop:** To secretly listen to other people's conversations





OH!  
- RED -  
- BULL -

Foshay Learning Center students performing in P.L.A.Y.'s Annenberg Middle School program. Photo by Steve Cohn

## EXERCISE: THAT THING YOU DO

CHOOSE A CHARACTER FROM *No Child...* and describe the **gesture** and voice that Sun uses to portray him or her. What does this suggest about that character's physicality and personality?

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## EXERCISE: MIRROR, MIRROR

*Nilaja Sun's first step in building a new character is to stand in front of a mirror. "The physicality comes first," Sun explains. She sometimes models characters after people she actually knows, but "what I do is more of an interpretation than an imitation. ... It's only an impression of people I know – 'cause I'm not making fun of anyone."*

**CHOOSE ONE OF THE CHARACTERS YOU CREATED** and outlined on page 10. Stand in front of a mirror and find one particular gesture that suggests that person. It might be something you have observed that person do or that suggests a quality that person has. Simplify the gesture so that it is clean and uncomplicated – and repeat it several times.

*Nilaja Sun's voice and mannerisms adjust to suit each of the characters she creates, but she doesn't make her characters sound particularly boy-like or girl-like. "Everyone has a different energy," she explains, "I try not to think of it as masculine or feminine energy because that gets into stereotypes that keep the character from being 'honest.'"*

**NOW GIVE THAT CHARACTER A VOICE.** Can you duplicate the voice of the person your character is based on? Start with your own voice and consider whether this character's voice is higher or lower, faster or slower, and louder or softer? Come up with a gesture and a voice for the other character you created on page 10. Make sure your characters have different voices and distinct gestures.

## EXERCISE:



**REHEARSE THE DIALOGUE YOU WROTE ON PAGE 13,** using the gesture and the voice that you have assigned to each character. Perform the scene for the same people who listened to you read your persuasive essay. Afterward, ask them if this method is more or less persuasive than when you read your essay and be sure to ask why.

## VOCAB

**Gesture:** A movement or body position that expresses an idea, emotion or opinion

**Rehearse:** To practice a presentation, performance or recital

Alright, I'm Ms. Sun and I will be with you all for the next 6 weeks and by the end of those glorious weeks, you will have read a play, analyzed the play, been cast in it, rehearsed it and lastly performed it. It's gonna be a whirlwind spectacle that I want you to start inviting your parents and friends and loved ones to come see.

—Ms. Sun in *No Child...*



# CONCLUDING REMARKS

**WE HOPE THIS GUIDE HAS ENHANCED** your experience of *No Child...* by offering context on contemporary issues in public education and by sharing methods of using the arts as a persuasive form to assert your opinion. Despite being challenged as a worthwhile area of study in the public school curriculum, the arts remain important to our culture for many reasons, including the ability to explore a variety of perspectives on world issues.

## RESOURCES

### BOOKS

#### *Up The Down Staircase*

by Bel Kaufman (Harper Perennial, 1991)  
Novel about teachers overcoming obstacles to reach their students

### WEBSITES

[www.ed.gov/nclb/landing.jhtml](http://www.ed.gov/nclb/landing.jhtml)

Everything the government ever wanted you to know about No Child Left Behind

[www.thisamericanlife.org/Radio\\_Episode.aspx?episode=218](http://www.thisamericanlife.org/Radio_Episode.aspx?episode=218)

This American Life: story of the inmates at a maximum security prison performing Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Act V, with the support of a teaching artist

[www.broadway.com/gen/Buzz\\_Story.aspx?ci=533831](http://www.broadway.com/gen/Buzz_Story.aspx?ci=533831)

Interview with theatre artist Nilaja Sun

### FILM

#### *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe*

directed by John Bailey (Showtime Networks, 2005)  
Lily Tomlin in multiple roles

#### *Stand and Deliver*

directed by Ramón Menéndez (Warner Bros. Pictures, 1988)  
Edward James Olmos as Jaime Escalante, a real-life teacher who brings calculus to inner-city kids

#### *Freedom Writers*

directed by Richard LaGravenese (Paramount, 2007)  
Hilary Swank as Erin Gruwell, a real-life teacher who brings literature to inner-city kids

#### *Music of the Heart*

directed by Wes Craven (Miramax, 1999)  
Meryl Streep as Roberta Guaspari, a real-life teacher who brings music to inner-city kids

# P.L.A.Y.

**FOR 37 YEARS**, Center Theatre Group's P.L.A.Y. (Performing for Los Angeles Youth) has served 25,000 – 35,000 young people, teachers and families annually through a variety of performances, residencies, discount ticket programs and innovative educational experiences. P.L.A.Y. offers programs that allow young people, teachers and families to attend productions at the Mark Taper Forum, Ahmanson and Kirk Douglas Theatres for low or no cost. P.L.A.Y. is dedicated to artistic excellence and innovation in its theatrical productions and to the development of young people's skills and creativity through the exploration of theatre, its literature, art and imagination.

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# P.L.A.Y.

PERFORMING FOR LOS ANGELES YOUTH

Kevin Barrios, "Distributed Intelligence"

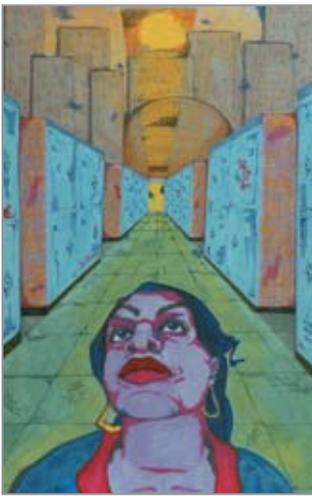


## Poster Competition

Center Theatre Group's P.L.A.Y. sponsors an annual competition for high school students to design the poster art for a play. The cover image, "Boot of Adversity" by Jeremy Ruthberg of Windward School, is the winning illustration in this year's *No Child...* competition. Kevin Barrios and Ivana Totaro, both from Palisades Charter High School, tied for second, and third place went to Diana Woodside, Los Angeles County High School for the Arts.

Student artwork can be viewed at the Downtown Central Library and in the lobby of the Kirk Douglas Theatre

Ivana Totaro, "Reach Up"



## Target Family Performances

Spend a weekend afternoon with your whole family. See a play and you will have something new to talk about, something new to laugh about, new songs to sing together. These special performances are followed by a post-show discussion in the theatre. Get the most from the experience by brushing up before the show: check out the free Discovery Guides on our website.

AGES 6+

***My Fair Lady***  
**April 12, 2008, 2pm**  
**Ahmanson Theatre**

The classic musical about Eliza Doolittle's transformation from flower-seller to lady.

***The Drowsy Chaperone***  
**July 12, 2008, 2pm**  
**Ahmanson Theatre**

The madcap musical comedy returns after a run on Broadway.

AGES 11+

***No Child...***  
**March 15, 2008, 2pm**  
**Kirk Douglas Theatre**

Sixteen characters, one actress: a solo performance about the struggle to put on a high school class play.

**HAVE QUESTIONS?** Call Audience Services at **213.628.2772** or check out the parent guide on our website, **[CenterTheatreGroup.org/education](http://CenterTheatreGroup.org/education)**.

Diana Woodside, "No Child"

